

Statement of Alberto M. Fernandez  
Ambassador-Designate to the Republic of Equatorial Guinea  
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations  
November 19, 2009

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to appear before you as President Obama's nominee to be Ambassador to the Republic of Equatorial Guinea.

It is a very great honor and privilege to appear before you today. I thank President Obama and Secretary Clinton for their confidence and trust. I am delighted that my wife Katy, my sons Josiah and Adam, and other family members are here with me on this occasion. I would also like to recognize many friends and colleagues who are here as well. As a person who came to this great country as a child with my family as political refugees from Cuba, I am deeply humbled and awed to be before this august body today. I have been privileged to serve as a soldier in the U.S. Army and then as a Foreign Service Officer, but to be before you today as an American is the greatest honor of all.

Although we have maintained diplomatic relations with Equatorial Guinea since its independence from Spain in 1968, if confirmed by the Senate, I would be only the sixth resident U.S. ambassador in Malabo. The need for deep engagement and real dialogue with the people and government

of Equatorial Guinea has grown. While this dialogue and engagement must be respectful of Equatorial Guinea's sovereignty and traditions, it must also be frank and sincere. If confirmed, I anticipate that our dialogue will be multifaceted, covering the full range of bilateral and multilateral concerns on an ongoing basis. As President Obama recently noted, "Africa's future is up to Africans," but we must be clear and forthright about the issues we would like to see addressed: this means significant improvement in human rights. It means legitimate political space for a democratic opposition; it means allowing for the development of a more robust civil society. It means finally having real change to fight corruption and improve transparency regarding the country's oil wealth.

Our interests in Equatorial Guinea are to promote better governance, democratic institutions, and human rights, and to help protect U.S. interests there.

Equatorial Guinea today is a candidate country in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), which supports improvement of fiscal transparency in revenue reporting. The Government of Equatorial Guinea (GREG) has made limited progress, but faces challenges to meet its validation deadline by March 2010, especially because it has moved too slowly to incorporate civil society into the process and support civil society

development. President Obama, in his July 11, 2009 speech in Accra, noted the need for Africans to work to build strong institutions and to strengthen accountability and transparency, to promote good governance. The President underscored our commitment to partner with African countries to achieve these goals. EITI is one of many ways to move decisively and rapidly in that direction.

Human rights promotion is also a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. Here, we can acknowledge that Equatorial Guinea has taken some measured steps, but that major human rights concerns still remain. In our 2008 Human Rights Report, we note many human rights problems, including systematic torture of prisoners and detainees by security forces, life-threatening conditions in prisons and detention facilities, and impunity for those who abuse. In November 2008, at the invitation of the GREG, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Torture, Manfred Nowak, visited the country and noted evidence of the systematic use of torture. While critical of the Special Rapporteur's initial findings, the GREG has signaled a willingness to look into these issues, including human rights abuses by its security forces and life threatening conditions in prisons and detention facilities. Concrete actions are necessary for real progress, and the GREG needs to take urgent corrective measures to address human rights abuses.

Presidential elections are scheduled to take place this year on November 29. We must continue to encourage the government to allow the press and the opposition to operate freely and ensure the independence of the national electoral commission to prevent voter irregularities and address complaints.

Another U.S. priority concerns maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. The unsuccessful sea-based attack on February 17, 2009 against the Presidential Palace in Malabo demonstrated the ongoing challenge of maritime security in this region. With over \$12 billion in energy interests and 600 to 700 Americans in country at any given time, the United States has clear economic and security interests in Equatorial Guinea.

Equatorial Guinea has surged to become the third largest oil and gas producer in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the substantial oil and gas revenues, Equatorial Guinea ranks at the bottom of many development indicators. We would like to continue to help encourage Equatorial Guinea to make wise and prudent decisions on how to allocate this bonanza so that it can have the widest possible positive impact on the development of that country and on the future of all of its people.

One tangible way that we are partnering with Equatorial Guinea for the welfare of its people is through the Social Needs Fund, which is financed

entirely by the GREG but draws on technical expertise provided by USAID.

We are advising the Government of Equatorial Guinea on how it can improve delivery of social services and help move social indicators in the areas of education, health, sanitation, women in development and the environment.

The challenges before this small country are daunting. But I am hopeful that, if I am confirmed, I can further a sincere spirit of dialogue and partnership, which could yield positive results for the people of Equatorial Guinea. They deserve a stable, democratic, prosperous and peaceful society. This longed-for transformation is well within the capacity of the people and leadership of Equatorial Guinea to achieve in the near future.

In addition to the major policy challenges outlined above, I wish to note one other important issue: some real operational and administrative challenges come with the operations of this relatively new and small embassy. If confirmed, I will give these issues personal and detailed attention, and I can assure you that the safety of the American community in Equatorial Guinea and the safety and well-being of my staff will be my top priority.

Finally, if I am confirmed, my wife Katy and I look forward to hosting you or any other member of this distinguished body who may want to visit Malabo.

I will be very happy to answer any questions you might have. Thank you very much.